

FARMS ON THE NILE

■ Introduction

Most ancient Egyptian farmers were not wealthy; therefore, they typically rented small plots of land from noblemen. Farming families generally lived in one story mud-brick houses often with only one room. The house might be furnished with wooden stools, reed mats, and a few pottery jars to carry water and store food. Outside in the courtyard would be the mud-brick bee hive-shaped ovens to bake bread, one of the staple foods of the Egyptians.

■ Family chores

The family worked together to do most tasks on the farm, though donkeys and oxen were used for heavy work. Boys helped in the fields while learning how to farm. Girls helped their mothers grind grain, bake bread, make meals, and weave cloth. During the harvest, all went to the fields to gather in the crops and help thresh and winnow the grain.

■ Plowing

As soon as the floodwaters from the Nile went down, farmers plowed their fields, before the sun baked the earth too hard to plow. Oxen were used to pull the plow, which was a heavy forked stick. In earliest times the plow was attached to the oxen's

horns, but later a shoulder yoke made plowing easier. Hoes were used to break up the large clods of earth; then seeds were scattered on the soil. While the earth was still muddy, pigs or sheep would trample the seed into the ground.

■ Irrigation

Canals were dug to allow the water from the Nile to reach more of the fields. Ditches divided each field into small squares. Water was lifted into these ditches by a shaduf. A shaduf had a long pole balanced on top of a crossbar. On one end of the pole was a rope and a bucket; on the other end was a counterweight. Manually the bucket was lowered into the water. When full, the counterweight swung it up onto the level of the ground.

■ Harvesting

Flint-bladed wooden sickles were used in harvesting. The grain was taken to be threshed either with flails in human hands, or by the feet of oxen, donkeys, or sheep. Threshing separated the straw and husks from the grain. Then the separated grain was winnowed. Winnowing involved throwing the grain up into the air so the chaff would blow away.

